Jason P. Schachter, Leif Jensen, and Gretchen T. Cornwell

Migration, Residential Mobility, and Poverty in Rural Pennsylvania

Because of its profound implications for growth and decline in rural America, migration has long been a topic of interest. Migration is critical for explaining processes of urbanization, as workers venture into nonmetro counties to live while commuting to jobs in the central cities and expanding suburbs of metro America. Rural sociologists have recently found a pattern of urban to rural migration among the poor. Pushed by expensive and poor-quality housing in the city and attracted by ample and low-cost housing and a higher quality of life in the countryside, the poor often "leapfrog over the city's suburban ring to settle in one or a group of economically distressed and depopulated towns in a rural periphery" (Fitchen, 1995, p. 193). This article uses the 1990 Census and a special 1991 survey of low-income families living in nonmetro areas of Pennsylvania to explore the reasons the poor move.

Pennsylvania provides a worthwhile laboratory in which to examine the links between poverty and migration in rural areas. While the Commonwealth contains a large metro population (metro counties hold about 86 percent of all Pennsylvanians), it also is highly rural in character. Half the counties are nonmetro, and about 31 percent of all Pennsylvanians live in rural areas, when the census-defined rural parts of metro counties are counted. This gives Pennsylvania the largest rural population of any State, in absolute terms. Within reach of both large and small metro areas, nonmetro Pennsylvania offers a good place to explore questions concerning the flow of the urban poor into rural areas.

Jason P. Schachter is a Ph.D. candidate in rural sociology, Leif Jensen an associate professor of rural sociology and sociology, and Gretchen T. Cornwell an assistant professor of rural sociology at Pennsylvania State University.

Rural Counties Gain Urban Poor, Lose Better Educated

Nonmetro Pennsylvania counties have been attracting poor from urban areas and the less educated, while losing those with college educations. This becomes particularly clear when the poverty status of counties is taken into consideration. We developed three indices of unequal migration interchange to help understand how poverty and education relate to rural migration (see "Data and Methods"). The Poverty Interchange Index, a measure of the percentage of poor inmigrants compared with the percentage of poor outmigrants, is

Data and Methods

To address questions about the movement of the poor from metro to nonmetro counties, we analyzed the Special County to County Migration File (STP28), which draws on data from the long form of the 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing. Based on a long-form question asking where each household individual aged 5 and older was living in 1985, this file contains counts for each possible intercounty move, as well as counts—for each U.S. county—of nonmovers, intracounty movers, and immigrants from abroad. In addition, these data are broken down by age, gender, race, education, and poverty status. As such, this file is the only data source available to provide recent and reliable estimates of intercounty migration flows. An effort has been made to eliminate college students from the analysis because they are often wrongly counted as poor (see note to table 2).

Migration interchange is expressed as the ratio of the size of inmigrant to outmigrant streams. Streams of three different subpopulations are used to calculate three distinct indexes of unequal interchange. The first, the Poverty Interchange Index (PER), is calculated as the percentage of inmigrants who are poor divided by the percentage of all outmigrants who are poor. The second, the Least Educated Poor Index (LEP), is calculated as the percentage of poor inmigrants with a high school education or less divided by the percentage of poor outmigrants with a high school education or less, and is our best estimate of noncollege student migration interchange. The third, the Brain Drain Index (BDI), is calculated as the percentage of outmigrants with some college education or more divided by the percentage of inmigrants with some college education or more. This is calculated a bit differently from the other two measures, in that values greater than one will denote counties that are at a disadvantage in the interchange of educated migrants. On all three indexes unity denotes equal interchange. Values greater than unity denote interchange that puts the county at a disadvantage (gaining poor, gaining least educated poor, losing college educated). Values less than unity represent advantageous interchange (losing poor, losing least educated poor, gaining college educated).

To answer questions about the motivations and frequency of migration, we analyzed data from the 1991 Rural Livelihood Strategies Survey (RLSS), a survey of 505 women in disproportionately low-income families in nonmetro Pennsylvania. The RLSS was designed to document economic coping strategies among the rural poor by describing and explaining patterns of reliance on market work, the informal economy, and social welfare programs. The survey asked about a wide variety of sociodemographic characteristics, which are available as controls, and contained a module asking about migration behavior and motivations.

To maximize the number of low-income households available for analysis, the sample was drawn using both random and nonrandom sampling techniques. First, a multistaged cluster sampling design was employed, which ultimately allowed for oversampling of minor civil divisions with high poverty rates. Within each, systematic random sampling was used to sample names from per capita tax lists, which can be used as up-to-date, publicly accessible, and comprehensive sampling frames for adult residents of a county. Nonrandom techniques used to boost the sample size of low-income households included snowball sampling and key informant referrals. Women interviewers sought interviews with women in sampled households who were either female heads or wives of male heads. Work published elsewhere compares the characteristics of the RLSS sample and the corresponding population from the 1990 U.S. Census and confirms a high level of comparability (Jensen, Cornwell, and Findeis, 1995). The use of only women for this sample suggests that some caution be used in interpreting these findings. Those women who were married might offer different reasons for moves than their husbands. Moreover, the survey did not cover households headed by unmarried men.

Of the sample of 505, there were 461 respondents (91.3 percent) who reported having moved at least once. Of these, 327 (70.9 percent) indicated their most recent move was within the same county (different house or township), while 134 (29.1 percent) had moved beyond county borders. With poverty thresholds set at 125 percent of official standards, 320 households were defined as nonpoor while 184 were defined as poor. The poverty rate of 36.4 percent well exceeds that for the general population because the poor were oversampled in this survey. When poverty status was cross tabulated with where the respondent first lived, the poor were slightly more likely to have moved within the county. In total, 34.8 percent of the poor had moved from a different county, while 43.4 percent of the nonpoor had moved from a different county. However, the chi-square was only marginally significant at 0.08. Table 3 also summarizes responses for the second and third most recent moves. Results from this part of the survey are presumably less accurate because respondents were being asked to recall events further back in time.

strongly related to a county's poverty status (table 1). That is, counties that already have large proportions of poor are the most likely to receive additional poor migrants. Similarly, the Least Educated Poor Index, the percentage of noncollege-educated poor inmigrants compared with the percentage of noncollege-educated poor outmigrants, shows that counties with higher poverty levels are attracting the less-educated poor. By contrast, the Brain Drain Index, the percentage of college-educated outmigrants compared with the percentage of college-educated inmigrants, reveals that the well-educated are leaving poorer counties faster than they are being replaced by well-educated newcomers. Moreover, areas with higher unemployment are more likely to gain a disproportionate percentage of least educated poor in their migration streams. Even without singling out the poorer counties, nonmetro Pennsylvania is at a disadvantage with metro areas in the educational quality of its migrants. Both the Least Educated Poor Index and the Brain Drain Index are high when

comparing metro with nonmetro counties, which suggests that, overall, nonmetro Pennsylvania has been losing its best educated to metro areas while gaining less-educated poor from them (table 2).

Housing, Quality of Life More Important Than Employment in Motivating Migrants

Why the poor migrate the way they do is a question that the Rural Livelihood Strategies Survey can help to answer. Do the poor generally move to find better employment so they may escape poverty, or do they move more often for cheaper housing and other reasons that merely alleviate poverty? That employment is not usually the main reason has already been suggested by the findings in table 1. A county's level of unemployment, for example, does not seem to be an important factor in the migration of the poor, except that counties with higher unemployment seem to attract the less-educated poor. Moreover, counties with high levels of manufacturing—an important source of employment in nonmetro Pennsylvania—tend to lose poor people to other counties, implying that not many poor are moving to manufacturing counties to seek jobs. The Rural Livelihood Strategies Survey confirms this and demonstrates the importance of housing, family, and quality-of-life issues in explaining migration among the nonmetro poor in Pennsylvania.

The survey asked respondents to choose from 11 possible reasons for their most recent move (table 3). Over half (54 percent) of those who moved felt that "to live in your own home" was a very or somewhat important reason. This was followed by "to save or live more cheaply" (34

Table 1

Migration indexes for nonmetro Pennsylvania counties

High-poverty counties are attracting additional poor migrants, especially the least educated

County characteristics	Poverty Interchange Index (PER)	Least Educated Poor Index (LEP)	Brain Drain Index (BDI)
		Percent	
Poverty rate	0.636*	0.571*	0.365*
Unemployment rate	.307	.477*	.316
Farming employment	-.099	-.196	-.027
Manufacturing employment	-.379*	-.143	.165

*Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Note: numbers are correlation coefficients of the matrix of county characteristics and migration indices.

Source: County to County Migration File (STP28) from the 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing.

Table 2

Migration flow totals for nonmetro Pennsylvania counties, 1985-90

Most poor nonmetro migrants move between metro and nonmetro counties

Item	Inmigrants	Outmigrants	Poor inmigrants	Poor outmigrants	PER*	LEP*	BDI*
	Number				Index		
Total nonmetro counties	142,935	156,716	23,869	23,198	1.128	1.316	1,359
To/from other nonmetro	35,624	37,413	6,260	6,432	1.023	1.045	1.021
To/from metro	107,311	119,303	17,609	16,766	1.163	1.460	1.444
Total nonmetro counties, excluding Clarion and Indiana[1]	128,983	143,339	18,232	21,571	940	1.259	1.289
To/from other nonmet	29,961	33,948	4,614	5,988	875	1.017	.993
To/from metro	99,022	109,391	13,618	15,583	965	1.392	1.365

*PER = Poverty Interchange Index. LEP = Least Educated Poor Index. BDI = Brain Drain Index. Refer to "Data and Methods" for details on calculation and interpretation.

[1]These counties were excluded due to the high concentration of college students in their migration streams.

Source: County to County Migration File (STP28) from the 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing.

Table 3

Reasons for three most recent moves by poverty status, nonmetro Pennsylvania, 1991

Employment was far less important a motivation for the poor than reasons relating to housing, family, and context

Reasons	Reason was somewhat or very important								
	Third most recent move			Most recent move			Second most recent move		
	Total	Nonpoor	Poor	Total	Nonpoor	Poor	Total	Nonpoor	Poor
	Percent								
Housing-related:									
To live in your own home	54.0	58.7	46.2*	31.3	32.8	29.1	26.5	26.9	26.0
To save or live more cheaply	34.1	27.5	44.7*	23.9	20.7	28.3	21.0	20.0	22.3
Couldn't afford to stay	14.3	9.9	21.3*	13.7`	10.9	17.4	12.5	9.1	17.3
Trouble with landlord	8.1	5.5	12.4*	11.7	7.9	16.8*	8.0	6.2	10.5
Employment-related:									
To get a better job	11.3	13.2	8.3	18.1	22.5	12.0*	22.5	25.5	18.3
Loss of job	4.3	4.0	4.7	8.0	6.41	0.0	6.8	6.2	7.7
Family-related:									
Family reasons (for example, marriage or separation)	28.6	27.9	29.9	33.0	32.0	34.0	34.0	32.8	35.6
To live closer to relatives or friends	21.3	19.9	24.7	22.3	21.9	22.9	21.7	18.6	26.0
Context-related:									
To live in a more rural area	30.8	35.3	23.6*	19.2	21.5	16.2	17.3	16.6	18.2
To live in a nicer neighborhood	30.5	30.4	30.7	19.1	19.9	18.1	22.4	25.3	18.3
To live in a more urban area	5.9	4.5	8.3*	6.3	6.5	6.1	6.5	4.1	9.7*
Number of respondents	461	289	172	362	211	151	253	147	106

*Differences between poor and nonpoor significant at $p < 0.05$ using a chi-square test for independence between poverty status and three-category Likert items measuring importance of reasons stated.

Source: 1991 Pennsylvania Rural Livelihood Strategies Survey.

percent), "to live in a more rural area" (31 percent), "to live in a nice neighborhood" (31 percent), and "family reasons," including marriage or marital disruption (29 percent). Alternatively, only 11 percent of respondents listed "to get a better job" as an important reason for moving.

The biggest difference in reasons for moving between the poor and the nonpoor is that "to save or live more cheaply" was more likely to be an important reason for the poor in their most recent move (45 percent) than for the nonpoor (28 percent). The poor were also more likely than the nonpoor to give as reasons for moving, "couldn't afford to stay," "trouble with landlord," and "to live in a more urban area." These findings suggest that the poor move for cheaper housing and personal reasons rather than employment-related reasons.

Could the different reasons for moving between the poor and nonpoor reflect the shorter distances the poor tend to move? The poor were more likely to have moved within the same county than the nonpoor, and reasons for moving differed by distance of the move (table 4). Intercounty moves were more likely to be motivated by the following: "to save or live more cheaply," "to live in a nicer neighborhood," "couldn't afford to stay," "to live in a more rural area," and "to live closer to relatives and friends." Within counties, "to live in your own home" was the main reason for moves. Additionally, the poor were more likely to move within the county for the reasons "trouble with landlord," "couldn't afford to stay," and "to live in a more urban area."

The sample size for intercounty moves is too small to permit a direct comparison between the poor and nonpoor. Nevertheless, when the reasons for intercounty moves are ranked, some conclusions can be drawn. Both groups ranked moving to a rural area or a nicer neighborhood highly, and both also felt that "to save or live more cheaply" was an important factor. But the nonpoor chose "to get a better job" more often than did the poor.

The poor move more frequently than the nonpoor. Only 15 percent of the nonpoor had moved more than once during the past 5 years compared with 44 percent of the poor. While only 6 percent of the nonpoor had moved three or more times, 29 percent of the poor had done so.

Table 4

Reasons for most recent move by distance of move and poverty status, nonmetro Pennsylvania, 1991

Cheaper living and family-related reasons were especially important in longer moves by the poor

Reasons	Reason was somewhat or very important					
	Intracounty moves			Intercounty moves		
	Total	Nonpoor	Poor	Total	Nonpoor	Poor
	Percent					
Housing-related:						
To live in your own home	60.1	68.5	48.1*	39.4**	39.1	40.0
To save or live more cheaply	28.4	18.9	41.6*	47.4**	44.1	55.0
Couldn't afford to stay	10.7	4.4	19.2*	22.8**	20.6	27.5
Trouble with landlord	10.0	6.6	14.5*	3.8	2.6	4.5
Employment-related:						
To get a better job	5.1	5.0	5.4	25.7**	28.8	17.5
Loss of job	1.6	1.7	1.3	10.6**	8.7	15.0
Family-related:						
Family reasons (for example, marriage or separation)	27.5	28.0	26.7	31.4	27.6	40.0
To live closer to relatives or friends	15.2	13.4	17.7	37.1**	32.6	47.0
Context-related:						
To live in a more rural area	22.0	25.6	16.9	51.5**	54.3	45.0
To live in a nicer neighborhood	27.7	25.4	30.8	37.4**	40.2	30.8
To live in a more urban area	6.5	4.5	9.2*	4.5	4.4	5.0
Number of respondents	311	181	130	132	92	40

*Differences between poor and nonpoor intracounty movers significant at $p < 0.05$.

**Differences between total intracounty and intercounty movers significant at $p < 0.05$.

Source: 1991 Pennsylvania Rural Livelihood Strategies Survey.

Poverty status and age are the strongest predictors of the number of moves in the past 5 years, with fewer moves among older respondents. The number of relatives present in an area is also a significant factor, with fewer moves made by those with more relatives living nearby. For the nonpoor, age, number of children, number of close relatives, unemployment, and not being in the labor force are significant predictors of moving. On the other hand, age is the only one of these factors significant in moves for the poor. This is consistent with the portrait of the poor moving frequently in response to economic push factors.

Migration of the Poor Can Affect Rural Communities

The poor circulate between poorer counties in Pennsylvania and move more often than the nonpoor. Pennsylvania counties are attracting a disproportionate number of poor as a percentage of their migration stream. Moreover, poor migrants are not distributed equally among nonmetro Pennsylvania counties. Communities can be affected greatly by the influx of poor inmigrants. The inmigration of even small numbers of poor can swell local welfare and food stamp rolls, as well as increase the need for special educational programs for newly arrived children. The inmigration of poor persons only adds to the strain on human and social services.

There are a number of fiscal and social costs of moving. The poor—who can least afford to—are the ones who move most frequently. Frequent moving may be disruptive for families and children. The prospect that the urban poor are seeking refuge in depressed rural communities does not brighten the future of places that may already be struggling with fiscal strain and dwindling resources. Moreover, relatively few migrants are needed to significantly alter the demographic and socioeconomic composition of small communities. An influx of urban poor could thus easily affect the social fabric of small receiving communities. But if the well-being of the urban poor improves substantially from moving to rural areas, then steps to facilitate this movement and to assist receiving areas in adjusting should perhaps be encouraged.

Conclusions

Employment-related factors were not found to be very important reasons for moving among the rural poor. Employment was more important for intercounty than intracounty moves, but even so, "to get a better job" was a relatively unimportant reason for moving. Housing-related reasons, especially those reflecting economic push factors, were most prominent for the rural poor. The poor seem to be attracted to opportunities present in areas of

high poverty, such as cheaper housing. Many simply circulated within areas of lower economic opportunity.

In addition to gaining the least educated poor from metro counties, nonmetro areas lost many of their college-educated residents to metro areas. This loss of human capital is a disadvantage to nonmetro counties, in that there are fewer skilled workers to attract more profitable industries, which reduces the potential for local development. In Pennsylvania, the better educated were leaving simultaneously with the importation of the least educated poor, exacerbating differences between metro and nonmetro counties between 1985 and 1990.

Our analysis raises questions that deserve a closer look. How these findings for Pennsylvania may apply to other areas, as well as the issue of what community-level characteristics attract the poor, should be further researched at the national level. Meanwhile, the poor will continue to move, without gaining many of the economic advantages often associated with migration.

For further reading...

Janet M. Fitchen, "Residential Mobility Among the Rural Poor," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 59, 1994, pp. 416- 36.

Janet M. Fitchen, "Spatial Redistribution of Poverty through Migration of Poor People to Depressed Rural Communities," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 60, 1995, pp. 181-201.

Leif Jensen, Gretchen T. Cornwell, and Jill L. Findeis, "Informal Work in Nonmetropolitan Pennsylvania," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 60, 1995, pp. 91-107.

Daniel T. Lichter, Diane K. McLaughlin, and Gretchen T. Cornwell, "Migration and the Loss of Human Resources in Rural America," in Lionel Beaulieu and David Mulkey, eds., *Investing in People: The Human Capital Needs of Rural America*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995, pp. 235-258.

Daniel T. Lichter, "Migration, Population Redistribution, and the New Spatial Inequality," in David L. Brown, Donald Field, and James J. Zuiches, eds., *The Demography of Rural Life*, University Park, PA: Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, 1993, pp. 19-46.

Mark Nord, A.E. Luloff, and Leif Jensen, "Migration and the Spatial Concentration of Poverty," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 60, 1995, pp. 399-415.